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STAT

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Kingcraft in Saudi Arabia

The White House has found cause for relief in one area of the chaotic Middle East: the royal family that virtually dictates what Americans pay for gas and oil has made a smooth transfer of power following the death of the monarch.

The CIA is still crossing its fingers, but it appears that the new Saudi ruler, King Fahd, has stepped quietly and comfortably into the shoes of the late King Khalid. To ease the transition, Fahd named one rival, Abdullah, as crown prince, and one ally, Prince Sultan, as his No. 3 man.

"The Saudis may not be as vulnerable as the former Iranian regime, due to closer ties with religious leaders and greater accessibility to the citizens," states a CIA report. "But like the shah, they are open to charges of corrupt financial practices."

"A key to continued stability of the royal family's leadership role will be its ability to cut corrupt financial practices within its own ranks and to move the best people into leadership roles. Otherwise internal disaffection could increase and threaten the regime."

Fahd has hinted publicly that he will try to keep the susceptible young princes from accepting kickbacks from foreign businessmen, but U.S. intelligence experts are far from confident that he can control them.

With the Iranian experience as a grim reminder of the mess that royal cupidity and insensitivity can create, the United States hopefully will encourage Fahd to root out the scandalous Saudi corruption, and will help him do it. For he has long been considered closely identified with Saudi Arabia's pro-U.S. policies, while Abdullah, now the heir apparent, is not.

"There is a pro-American bias in the Saudi government," a State Department report notes, explaining that this is "due to the quality of American goods, the reliability of U.S. agreements, and the educational background of dozens of Saudi leaders." The danger here is obvious: Cadillacs, AWACS planes and the Old School Tie would mean nothing to any revolutionary govern-

ment that might overthrow the royal regime.

Inside the Saudi family circle, CIA analysts warn, King Fahd could have problems with Prince Sultan. Though Sultan and Fahd are full brothers, they were on the outs several years ago. But just before King Faial was assassinated in 1975, the two brothers were reconciled. Fahd became crown prince and settled down to the serious business of running the government under ailing King Khalid. Yet the CIA noted that "the support or at least the acquiescence of Sultan is vital to Fahd."

When Fahd succeeded Khalid, the choice for crown prince, according to the CIA, was "between Sultan, perhaps the most able and certainly the most ambitious candidate, and Abdullah, technically next in line." The CIA correctly predicted that Abdullah would get the job.

The important thing to Fahd was that his full brother Sultan be named crown prince-designate. "If Fahd can make this deal," the CIA explained, "the so-called 'Sudeiri Seven' brothers headed by Fahd and Sultan will be in a position to dominate the government."

Although "this will almost certainly set off a variety of opposition inside the royal family," the CIA analysts noted, "past performances suggest that the rather odd Saudi system will solve the succession problem."

Dynastic rivalry aside, perhaps the greatest continuing threat to the "odd Saudi system" is the possibility of an army coup. There have been more than a dozen coup attempts, at least two of them quite serious.

So far, the wily Saudi family has been able to thwart army leaders. "The Saudi rulers have taken extensive precautions," the CIA notes. "Live ammunition is rarely issued to the troops. Many young members of the royal family are military officers." And the national guard, made up of Bedouins chosen for their loyalty to the regime, is always roughly equal in strength to the army, and is stationed at all the strategic points.

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